

With You by Th3W4nd3r1ng0n3

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action, Angry Mike, Angst, Boy coping with loss in the wrong way maybe, Don't really know where I'm going with this, Doubtful Hopper, F/M, Feels I guess, Friendship Conflicts, Gunslinging Hopper and Jonathan, Oneshot (for now I guess), Panicked Mike, Sad Mike, Sibling comfort, Supportive Jim, Tension, Violent Mike, awkward Jonathan, first fic, good boyfriend Jonathan, hurt/comfort?, might continue it, or maybe full on psycho, sad I guess, slightly crazy Mike, smug Mike, supportive Nancy, teasing Mike

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-08-25

Updated: 2017-11-05

Packaged: 2022-04-02 14:37:04

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 5

Words: 12,873

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

A year later and Mike still hasn't given up on her.

Almost no one seems to understand that he never will.

(And it infuriates him)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

So hey there! I'm the Wandering One and this is my first story, this is kinda what happens when you finish a GREAT show and have a sudden urge to write stuff up. I've been a reader for YEARS but I never really had the nerve to actually write and post my own ideas here, up until now at least. I hope this ain't too bad, English ain't really my first language (it's Spanish), but hey! Guy's gotta practice and this is way more fun than writing reports.

If you encounter any typos or mistakes, please tell me about them, I want to improve, same goes for thoughts and criticism, I want to become a better writer and I'm guessing that the first step is actually knowing what you do wrong.

Comments would be highly appreciated, I'll try to answer them.

Maybe, if people like this, I might add more chapters to this thing, but for now it's just a Oneshot

Nice to meet ya

-The Wandering One

He should have kissed her more.

Should have talked, hugged, *be* with her more

But it's too late for that

These words have been on his mind for the last year, they are on his mind right here, right now, in the middle of Mirkwood with a box filled with stuff for a lost girl (she is NOT dead) and Chief Hopper by his side with a sad look on his face.

Yes, this is how Mike Wheeler spends most of his Sundays (Sometimes his mom manages to actually *catch* him when he's leaving (sneaking out), but not too often), huddled up with Chief Jim Hopper to drop off some supplies for Eleven, they've been doing this for over year now and Mike isn't planning to stop, not now, not ever.

Much to everyone else's despair.

While his father manages to *still* masterfully ignore him and any other related topic that might affect their perfect nuclear family life (he's strangely okay with that, sometimes he likes to pretend that Hopper is his real father, he at least *listens*), his mother raves and rants and *pleads* for her happy little baby Mike to return, to talk to her, to tell her what's wrong. But old happy Mike hasn't returned yet and he refuses to bring him back until Eleven returns, no matter how much his mother might cry herself to sleep unable to breach through the high walls her son has raised to separate them (he sometimes feels guilty about that, lingers on his parents' bedroom door at night, but he never knocks).

His talks with Nancy a lot, she lost someone too after all (Jonathan sits awkwardly by sometimes, eyes full of pity that make Mike angrier than the guy deserves) but it's not the same, Nancy had closure, Barb was dead and she couldn't do anything about it, she grieved her friend and moved on.

Mike couldn't move on

Everything about her being gone was confusing and mysterious and it wasn't *fair*-

It made Mike furious in a way than nothing else before or after could, she was there and when the lights stopped flashing she was *gone*, GONE. But she was there, somewhere out there, she was a survivor and she was surviving and she would be back one day, this was the truth that ruled his existence, his only certainty, the only thing he would believe beyond any doubt and he would die before moving on and forgetting her.

He would never forget

Friends don't betray each other

The fury would shift and twist and redirect itself on to other things, other people. School, home, friends, family, he punched and kicked and messed stuff up, screaming and cursing, picking up fights everywhere he could. No one dared to push him anymore, but only because they were afraid of him, being angry was easier than being sad and he was angrier than ever.

I'm the Monster

There were moments, he and the gang (Will was back...but different, sometimes there, sometimes not) would lock themselves on his basement play campaigns all day, watch movies all night, her mother would come down with snacks and crack a smile at the sight of a laughing Mike. But there was a tension, heavy in the air, so obvious that it hurt but that everyone refused to acknowledge. El and the Upside Down were forbidden themes, hidden triggers for the Mike-Bomb to be unleashed (to be fair the Upside Down wasn't Will's cup of tea either, his eyes would twitch and his body would curl up in a ball of fear and panic).

Her pillow fort remained untouched, a testament and monument to her existence and his refusal to accept any possibility of that mysterious girl not returning. No one dared to even get close to it, the unspoken decree of Mike's silent Law and Will was ominous, no one would challenge these unspoken laws unless they wished to meet with Mike's swift judgment and by now everyone of them knew what Mike's wrath looked like (he punched Lucas in the face last time he told him to move on and forget about it, 6 months later and there's still no apology from either side).

They all knew and understood where his anger and aggression was coming from.

That didn't mean they liked it.

Sometimes his eyes would wander to her pillow fort and his gaze would linger a little too much, empty look on his face as he wondered about that scared girl that hid oh-so long ago in that exact same place and how she managed to change his world in so little

time, his friends would shut up and they would look at him. Silent conversations in little glances between each other when they thought he didn't notice.

He always noticed

(He hated it)

"You're all broody again kid"

Hop's voice yanks him out of his thoughts so suddenly that he almost yelps, twitching visibly he gets up and gives the older man his own sorry excuse of a smile, Hopper understands, he should throw the man a bone, but he can't force himself to be happy, he has tried and he has failed.

"Guess so" Mike replies meekly, Hop's hand settles on his shoulder reassuring and comforting, but unlike the rest there's no pity in his aura, just understanding and regret (he wishes he could tell Hop that it wasn't his fault, the same way he does with him). He had a daughter once, a little girl that was his world, it took almost nine months, but one rainy Sunday night he shared his own experience with him, hard voice and empty eyes.

I just want you to know...that I understand kid

You don't

I do

He lost too and while he can't bring his daughter back, he believes he can bring El back, he hasn't given up on her and that's enough for Michael. That's why he doesn't flinch or pushes his hand away, he lets it rest there, knows he's waiting for Mike to say something but he feels like he's got something in his throat and fears that he might cry if he opens his mouth. Hopper seems to feel the tension on the boy's shoulders and removes his hand.

"C'mon kid, I'll drive you home"

Mike drives a hand through his hair, swallows, trying to keep his dignity intact, he's NOT going to break down. Eventually he just

nods, mouth shut tight and hands on his jacket pockets.

"Just...gimme a second"

Jim nods and gives him some space.

The silence stretches through the forest, finding Mike, coiling around his throat like a noose.

Mike

His name rings through the nothingness, so quiet yet so incredibly loud at the same time.

Here we go again

Mike

He thinks he can see her sometimes, hear her. In school, in his basement, in his room, deep in the night. An unseen presence just out of his reach, at first he was hopeful, but hope turned into disappointment, disappointment into desperation and desperation into fury. He grits his teeth, fist clenching.

Mike

The air feels colder, the presence heavier, Mike wonders if he's going crazy. There are times when he thinks he can see her, just in the corner of his vision, torn dress and ripped jacket, bleeding nose and those damn eyes of her, eyes that don't ever let him go, but when he moves to look at her she's gone, never there at all.

Mike

Something's behind him, he feels it, he wants to feel it, like a hand reaching out for him. He has felt this before, too many times now and he always falls for it, his heart quickens as his anticipation grows, so treacherous. But maybe...maybe this time...*El!*

Mike

He turns around

...

Nothing

Jim lights up a cigarette as a scream full of anger fills up the forest

Just another Sunday.

Mike hikes back to Jim's truck, throws his bike on the back and climbs up. There aren't any questions or explanations, just the same old silence and the Hawkins police chief starts off his truck.

Somewhere else, very close yet so very far, trapped in the valley of shadows, a girl screams a boy's name once again.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Lucas have a little...disagreement

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey there!

First of all, I want to thank all of the people who commented, gave kudos or bookmarked this story. I seriously did not expect such a positive feedback and in these days full of exams, presentations, school projects and reports, your comments made my day. There's nothing like looking at that little email telling you that someone just gave your story kudos, a nice morale boost I must say.

I also want to remind you that I happily accept criticism, I strive for improvement and would love if you all helped in getting better at it.

C'mon guys, don't be shy, I won't cry

Also, I warmly accept suggestions and ideas for the story, I still don't really know where this is going and for now it's basically just a bunch of OneShots in the same universe. And if you'd like me to write about another show, anime, game, book, I might as well try to write something, just don't expect anything longer than a OneShot, this is kinda my focus right now.

I'll try to respond to comments

So, enough of my talk

Here's the second chapter, hope you like it.

-The Wandering One

They were sitting on some playground, probably at an hour that should have all of their mothers (specially Will's, and nowadays, Mike's) worried, dark enough for all the little kids to go home, bright enough for all the naughty teenagers to stay indoors. Their bikes were all thrown in a bunch on a corner and the sky was starting to get that curious color, a tint of fiery orange in the distance that made the rest look kinda purple.

That's what Dustin thought at least

He looked at his friends.

Will looked relatively well in that moment, looking at the sunset, covered with one of his brother's jackets, too big for him but cozy lookin'.

Will was curious one now, Dustin thought, they went through so much to bring him back, but Dustin feels like something stayed behind, in those quiet moments when the youngest of the Byers seems to recoil in fear of nothing and his eyes go wide, wild and full of panic.

Plus the constant coughing fits

No matter how much he and Lucas asked, Will wouldn't give them anything. He'd change subjects, ignore them, make up some bullshit that didn't make any sense-

They were worried about him, why can't Will notice that-

Or perhaps he notices but still doesn't say anything-

What if-

Dustin reprimands himself mentally, he's always overthinking stuff, always has.

He would tell Mike

Some little voice tells him, deep inside his brain, filled with more contempt that is usual for Dustin, but he has been hearing it more with each passing day.

He would tell Mike, they were pretty close since before he disappeared and now they spend way more time together than ever before (well...it's more like Will following Mike around...and Mike letting him), the Wheeler boy always had knack for making people say things, with his wide eyes and his *Friends don't lie to each other* (It's not like he and Lucas hadn't *tried* to tell that to Will, but there's a unique way of how Mike Wheeler says it, all soft and steady, they *can't* do that, Dustin speaks funny for Christ-).

His gaze shifts at his other two friends.

There's Lucas, all dressed up on his military stile. Boots, cap, jacket, it makes him look pretty cool, Dustin thinks (the rest of the school thinks it makes him look stupid, but no one actually *does* anything to them anymore...not after the Troy-Mike...incident). He's standing next to Mike, who's sitting on a swing lookin' all broody (again).

For a second there Dustin thinks they're all like in the old times. Happy and together and screw any haters that thought they were nerds, Will's humming *Should I stay or should I go*, Lucas is telling Mike some jokes and Mike's smiling.

But it isn't the same

Even in this casual exchange of jokes, there's a palpable tension between Lucas and Mike, an invisible electric fence, thin but oh so incredibly dangerous. They know it's coming, the *thing*, *The One Who Shall Not Be Named*...

Eleven

He knew there was something going on between El and Mike, they all knew, they weren't stupid (you don't get bullied when you're stupid), always exchanging those weird glances that could give an elephant diabetes, that soft talk he never used on anyone else...and they were all flustered when he found them on that room when the bad men came for them on Mike's house.

Did they...

No...

Well...

Irrelevant, focus Henderson

As special as that relationship or whatever-the-hell they had between them might have been, Mike was acting as if she were his personal grieving memento, he kept that damn pillow fort around, he didn't say it, but the fact that the fort should not under ANY circumstances be touched was general knowledge, fear was the deciding factor on that equation, six month without Eleven, six month with an increasingly volatile Mike, he somehow managed to even scare his *mother* into not touching the thing (that last part actually *really* scare him).

It was starting to piss him off

And it was making Lucas crazy

The guy wouldn't stop talking about how stupid it was that Mike refused to get over it when they could do nothing but *wait*. She was *their* friend too, but Mike seemed obsessed with whatever the hell they had and he obviously thought it was *way* more important than his friendship with them.

Dustin couldn't help but to agree to more than a few of his ramblings.

But even when Mike seemed to lash out at everything and Lucas looked like he could explode from all that repressed rage, Dustin could see what they really felt (he used to be mediator of the group after all, thank you very much).

Desperation

Hot, searing desperation

With each passing day their return seemed more unlikely

And with each passing day Mike seemed to sink even further into that cold abyss he seemed to have fallen into.

Above all Mike was hurt and confused and *sad*, he didn't seem to understand why it happened (to be fair...none of them did) and he

didn't know what to do and lashed out in anger at everything because it was easier than talking about it.

(Damn he should be a shrink)

Thing is they WANTED to help him.

But the guy wouldn't listen, he would change subjects, point at stuff, make excuses and if none of that worked he'd give you *that* look, his eyes would grow cold and he would look at you as if he didn't know you, as if he wouldn't *care* if he hurt you.

It was fucking terrifying

He spent his days wandering from place to place, stalking through the forests and gazing at the distance or picking up fights where he could (he's completely *sure* that Mike would be in jail or something if Chief Hopper didn't have such a soft spot for him), his grades dropped steadily and no amount of scolding or punishments from parents or teachers managed to stop his wanderings or his nightly escapades.

His mother was so worried that she actually asked them to *watch him*

HIS

MOTHER

Just...please, I-I don't even know where he is most of the time.

Ms. Wheeler, we-

Just...please

Lucas seemed to be growing more annoyed by Mike by the minute. Out of all of them, perhaps it was Lucas who seemed to want to help him the most, he was the one that suggested Ideas that asked them, of course he wouldn't talk about it around Mike, but Lucas was guilty, about how he treated El, the things he said. Lucas was desperate to revive the bond he had with Mike, but the more he pushed, the more Mike retreated and concern was starting to become anger.

He looks at them again.

Lucas eyes shift, from jovial, to serious

No

He's not...

"Mike..." He starts

The playground falls silent

Will stopped humming, looking at the scene with equal fear and confusion

"I know it's been...hard. For you..."

Mike's faint smile dies immediately

OH HELL NO

Despite the delicacy of the situation, Lucas holds his ground rather well, serious look, unwavering posture, his body language screams steadiness, but the anticipation is palpable in his aura, they're all waiting for Mike to snap.

Mike has stopped all movement on the swing, completely still, he grips the chains calmly, his expression betrays nothing, they can't see his eyes because of his hair but that black jacket he got on Christmas seems to be irradiating *hatred*.

His fingers tap the chain, once, twice.

"No"

His voice if nothing, is neutral as hell and empty Mike is seriously way more creepy than angry Mike (Some calm-before-the-storm shit right there) and by all means, the discussion should have ended right there and then.

But of course Lucas couldn't keep his mouth shut

"We're worried about-"

"No"

The word cuts through the air like a knife, this is his statement, this discussion ends here and by the slight elevation of his tone, it is implied that there will be consequences if otherwise.

C'mon Lucas, that's it, shut up.

Lucas face twist in a look of confusion, then exasperation and finally anger.

He opens his mouth

Fuck

"You know, I'm real sick of your bullshit-"

Mike is on his feet faster than they all expected, jumping up like a piston to face Lucas, threatening look on his face. Lucas steps back a bit, taken by surprise by the sudden movement and his stoic façade is betrayed for just a second when his face twists in fear, but he regains his footing as fast as he lost it, defiant look to match.

"What did you say?"

Mike's tone is low and if any other look was present on his eyes instead of the one he had on right now, no one would say it wasn't a polite question, but his eyes and his tight posture roar aggressiveness, Lucas will shut up, by all means necessary.

"It's been six months Mike and you're acting like a crazy person"

The Wheeler boy's hands ball into fist. Mike's taller now, taller than all of them and right now with him towering over Lucas, Dustin has no idea how Lucas is still standing with his chin held high there.

Will's eyes were rapidly traveling from one boy to the other, struggling to find words.

"Guys..."

He's promptly ignored, right now, Mike has only eyes for Lucas and

not for any good reason.

"Shut up Lucas"

There's gritted teeth now and his expression grows fiercer.

C'mon Lucas, shut uuuuup.

"You need to hear this"

FUCK

"Lucas. Shut. Up"

Mike's words seemed to be more growls than actual words, his fist seemed to be tighter

"You gotta stop going around screwing stuff up, and what about all that running-through-the-woods thing you got going now-you know how weird that is right?"

"Shut. Up"

This time he's snarling and somehow he seemed to have gotten closer to Lucas, there's hell in his eyes and his staring at the Sinclair boy with burning intensity.

Lucas gulps, but he doesn't back down

StupidStupidStupidStupidSTUPID

"Guys!"

Will almost screams and Dustin's panicking, he has no idea what to do, dammit he's *supposed* to fix this, he always got them back on track, but they're impossible-

"You need to get over it"

And that's it.

Silence falls over them.

And where there was once fire in Mike's eyes, now there's nothing.

He's got *THAT* look.

Hey Frogface

Not now

Hey-

Not. Now

Troy moved fast, they were on the hall, people were walking around, he wouldn't use the knife here, but the three of them being beaten on the hall was not a rare occurrence. Lucas, Will and Dustin couldn't do much when the bully pushed Mike against the lockers.

No more freak to keep ya safe Frogface

And that was it

He got a look they never saw before. Empty and cold...

No one expected the next thing

Mike's fist crashed against his face, a tooth flew around and everyone in the hall halted their movements. Troy looked confused as hell, his sidekick took a step back as Troy stumbled, trying to regain some semblance of dignity. Mike was cool as a winter breeze.

Frogface...

The bully growled

Lucas stuttered

Mike what the-

Mike punched again, the savage swing connecting with his jaw, there was a wet, cracking sound and Troy let out a strange sound, like a whimper, he stumbled around, unable to find his footing as he let out incomprehensible babble and a little trail of blood trickled out of his

mouth mixed in with saliva.

Mike advanced towards his victim, his hand was messed up, fingers twisted up in all the wrong places

Mike punched again, a wet sound and Troy was on the ground, he twitched before attempting to get up, advance promptly cancelled by another Wheeler knuckle-sandwich.

Mike screamed or roared

They were too terrified to tell the difference

He hit again

And again

And again

And again

He wasn't stopping

OH SHIT HE WASN'T STOPPING

It took all three of them and a teacher to get him off the bully, Troy's face still looks like shit and Troy's mother almost sued the Wheelers.

Dustin didn't really see it, Lucas face contorted into something terrified, there was a wet, crunching sound and in the next second he was on the ground, Mike's arm still on the air, signifying the brutal hook he gave his former best friend.

Mike steps forward, toward Lucas.

"GUYS!"

Will screams, desperate, running towards them and Dustin follows as fast as he can. They grab Mike's arms and for a second there he thinks that's it, they're done, dead, he's going to beat them to a pulp and then finish Lucas off.

But he stops.

Takes a step back

Lucas' on the ground, arms held up in a feeble attempt at defense, right now he doesn't know Mike, no more masks, no more façades , he's scared.

Mike looks around, confused as if he doesn't recall what he did or why. His expression changes for a second and there's a thousand things there, guilt, confusion, sadness, regret.

"Told you to....to shut up"

He whispers, body language screaming submission, his eyes beg for forgiveness and the anger seems to have gone very far away.

But as soon as he cools down he turns the heat right back up to eleven.

(Dustin's sooooo gratefull that Mike can't read minds)

"I told you to shut up"

He snarls, fire back in his eyes, and storms off, he gets his bike with a huff and rides off.

Later that night, in the bathroom of a basement, a boy cries the apologies he can't say, bloodied hand dripping and broken mirror taunting him.

Somewhere close, yet so very far, a girl touches the reflection of a familiar boy on a broken mirror as she whispers his name.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper drives Mike home.

Mike bumps up with an unexpected visitor

And of course:

Nancy

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey there!

My god, so many kudos!, I seriously can't believe you people like it so much!

Welp, I better talk about something else before I start throwing up rainbows.

I just wanted to leave this here before tomorrow, won't be able to write for a few days and I wanted to at least give you people this.

As always, thanks to all the people who commented, gave kudos or bookmarked this story.

I happily accept criticism, suggestions and requests.

I'll try to respond to any comments

That all?

Yeah?

Yeah

See ya!

-The Wandering One

The lights danced around in the car as they passed them by, shining upon them before engulfing them in darkness again. Mike watched the lights in daze, for reasons he didn't exactly understand, perhaps he was just bored (or maybe he was waiting for the lights to flicker. For her to call him).

A light hum emanated from Chief Hopper, calmly driving the truck towards Mike's house.

Mike's left eye twitched

Please don't start talking, please don't start talking, please don't start talkin-

The Hawkins police chief cleared his throat

Shit

There's a pause, hesitation, time for thoughts to be organized into words. Mike focuses on his own reflection on the window.

Jim opens his mouth, once, twice, not finding any real words of comfort to give to the boy.

He sighs

"I'm sorry kid"

He says, eyes on the road.

Mike feels like there's something stuck in his throat, this again. He shouldn't have screamed or at least waited until he was out of Hopper's earshot.

Hopper feels like all he's got to offer to the boy are disappointments, they talk, they walk, he tells them about the investigation (which gives them no goddamn leads) and they deliver the supplies on Sundays. It's become quite the routine but what he hoped would be a way to cheer Mike up has turned into the boy's obsession.

The kid's sinking deeper into a dark pit that no one save a lost girl can get him out of.

A lost girl he's supposed to find-

"S' not your fault"

The voice is soft, weak, almost a whisper, but it means a lot for Mike. This is him paying Hop back, no one but Mike should punish their selves for El's disappearance.

Hop's got enough undeserved guilt to carry around already.

It wasn't Hopper's fault, or Dustin's, or Will's, or Lucas'

It was his

He promised that nothing would happen to her.

He failed.

Made promises he couldn't keep, thought he could protect her from men that tormented her for years, from monsters.

(The fuck were they thinking?! Trying to kill some inter-dimensional beast with a slingshot)

She saved him

Held him and lifted him up from certain death.

He did nothing

HE DID NOTHING

"Hey"

Hopper's voice shakes him out of his daze.

He lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding and embarrassingly realizes that he had been shaking, fist closed tight. He promised he would not break down. The car has stopped and his house is across the street. Mike slowly looks back at Chief Hopper, trying to ignore the way he looks at him, with concern, the way his own father never looks at him.

"You okay?"

This too, has become a routine, his occasional daydreaming and the concern that comes with them.

Mike nods, forcing out an obviously fake smile, he mutters a thanks and gets out of Chief Hopper's truck.

The man gaze lingers on the voice for just another minute, silently wondering what the hell is he going to do.

He starts of the engine just as Mike waves him goodbye with a lazy hand.

Another sighs escapes Mike's mouth as he observes his own house, assessing his options.

He has a key, sure, but there's no way in hell he's going through the front door, his mother might be waiting for him there, or worse, Nancy (At least he can actually *ignore* his mother).

What he usually would do is climbing to his window, minimalizing the risk of being discovered, but tonight he doesn't feel very inclined to do that, he feels...exhausted, in more ways that he's comfortable of.

That leaves the third option:

Going through the back door, the basement and either sleep there or sneak all the way around the house to get to his room.

The basement though, he doesn't like sleeping there.

Goodbye Mike

EL!

*He screams as he wakes up, covered by a sheen of thick cold sweat, breathing hard and wild eyes looking frantically for **her**.*

But all he gets is the silence of the empty pillow fort

Nope

Sneaking it is.

As he walks across the street, his eyes catch up to something, a familiar vehicle parked slightly away from the house.

Jonathan

Huh

If he's lucky, maybe he won't have to use the Walkman tonight.

He measures his steps, stance low and light feet, he's done this a thousand times now. But as he goes around the house for the backdoor he stumbles with a face he was kind of hoping of not meeting tonight.

Jonathan's stance is as slow as his, with a finesse of movement that lets Mike know that he too, has done this plenty of times now. They freeze as they see each other, statues held in position by short-term panic. Jonathan moves first, straightening his stance and rolling what might be real or fake tension of his shoulders. The guy radiates awkwardness, practically vibrating as his brain works tirelessly to transform thoughts into words and words into coherent excuses.

Mike finds him kind of funny.

He stands straight too, eyeing what he supposes is his sister's boyfriend now (she never really told mom...or anyone, but she stopped seeing that Harrington guy) with a wider grin that is probably polite. He guesses that getting enjoyment out of someone's anxiety isn't very nice.

But hey, he takes what he can get.

Jonathan nods as he clears his throat, looking at everything but Mike.

"Mike"

He rasps as a greeting.

Mike meanwhile, stares intently at the young man as he tries to suppress his growing smirk, the boy nods as well.

"Jonathan"

He smoothly says.

A moment of awkward silence follows.

"I-I'm here for-"

"Nancy, yes, kinda creepy if you had come for *me*"

He almost barks a laugh at the guy's following expression, Jonathan seems to mess with his hands a little too much as he realizes that he's losing his cool in front of a 14-year old.

"How..."

"Not very subtle, just do me a solid and...ya know, keep it quiet tonight"

The guy, unlike that Steve prick, actually had the decency to blush. Jonathan's face flustered up so quickly and violently that Mike almost could *feel* the heat radiating beneath his cheeks. A laugh is stifled as he moves to open the back door.

"Wha-! How?! We-! We-we...we, uh...we've never..."

Mike lets out that chuckle and manages to keep a maniacal laughter from joining.

He's a terrible person.

"Really? Huh, it took that Harrington guy less time, must be doin' something wrong there pal"

The expression on his face is something that Mike could only describe as priceless. There's an equal mix of indignation, confusion, hurt and just general panic.

Priceless

"How? What?-wait, really?"

Mike doesn't know what's funnier, his deep indignation or how quickly it turned into desperate curiosity.

"I dunno, maybe, maybe not. You know what? I don't care, thinking about Harrington's quarterback body all over my sister is *not* something I want to actually think about"

"Yeah...me neither"

Jonathan responds almost instantly and Mike opens the door, leading him in.

It's not like Steve Harrington ever did anything *bad* to him or Nancy, (Well...there was that whole Slut-Wheeler thing, him and his idiot friend things that Mike heard and never forgot about) by all means, the guy was the personification of the gentleman, every time he visited or was seen in public with Nancy, Harrington was trying hard to make amends with her, but apparently that wasn't enough (something Mike is probably more happy about than he should).

But c'mon, he was a popular, arrogant, football player, basically the antithesis of everything geeky Michael Wheeler stood for. The kind of guy he used to dread meeting in high school.

An awkward social outcast like Jonathan was a way more preferable alternative in Mike's eyes

(Considering that Mike himself was kind of Hawkins' biggest social outcast right now)

But all that was kind of irrelevant, now that he remembers that he just let Jonathan Byers inside the basement.

His basement

The basement he hasn't let *anyone* in for the last three months.

Fuck

Even in almost complete darkness, Jonathan can see it.

The Christmas lights hanging everywhere, the radios carefully positioned on more than a few corners.

The complete and utter mess of the space.

It just *screams*

Desperation

Obsession

He saw enough of that with his mother.

Jonathan flips the switch before Mike can say anything.

The young man's eyes open wide at the scene

The Christmas lights hang over them, like a grotesque scene that was stolen from his own house, there's even a painted alphabet on a wall.

Mike is completely silent

So...it worked?

What?

The whole lights stuff, your mom managed to talk to you with them?

Uh...yeah, I mean...she did something weird, like...wrote an alphabet on a wall

Huh

Uh...Mike?

Hm?

Why...why do you ask?

Just curious

There's a plethora of discarded bags and tiny boxes of what he thinks was a lot of junk food and a legion ripped out pages of comic books and broken toys discarded around the whole room. Radios have been arranged around, no weak spots, no single space where Mike wouldn't be able to hear *some* kind of static, he bets that the kid got them all synced on the same sequence.

His eyes keep on travelling

No

There, on tucked up corner, that characteristic board he's seen Will treasure so much on his own house, broken up in such a way that it seems like Mike repeatedly kicked it with the intention of outright destroying it. On the same corner is *that* notebook, a red one, Will told him.

Mike's always writing his campaigns on that thing. I wish I could write like he does, you know?

The pages are torn and have been thrown around the object, rejected, discarded, useless for Mike's new way of living.

From his spot he can see the broken mirror on the bathroom and right *there*.

An anomaly, the single clean and untouched place of the boy's rage in the room.

A fort made of pillows and blankets, pristine, perfect, treasured.

Jesus

Just for how *long* has all this been going on?

He looks back at Mike.

The smug boy from earlier is gone, replaced by a silent one, body language stiff and eyes full of something Jonathan can't quite describe.

Anger?

Fear?

He opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out, he tries again, nothing.

"Mike"

He manages.

"No"

Mike answers almost on reflex, but sure as hell, he won't talk, not to him and there's nothing he can do to change that right now.

Mike's impulsive, not stupid, there's no one of his age right now with the enough guts or muscle to actually stop him when he goes *there*, to that dark place outside his own thoughts and lets his body do the talking. But there are things he won't do, attacking Jonathan Byers is one of them (Disregard the fact that the guy almost killed Steve Harrington, extra points for him).

The guy is as shocked as any person concerned or not would be and while he understands that all of this looks crazy, Mike still hates it, the pity, the questions, he won't talk, not tonight.

Jonathan nods, slowly, carefully, assessing him as much Mike is assessing him. They're both as tense as when they found each other, but now for entirely different reasons, there's a promise in Jonathan's eyes, *I won't let this go* he seems to say, but Mike doesn't want his help.

(He so desperately wants it)

Jonathan paces around the room, Mike feels like he's making an autopsy of his mind, this is forbidden territory, his darkest, no mortal should be here.

Hehatesithehatesithehatesit

He seems to be hovering closer to the Pillow fort and Mike's hand twitches as he tries to stop himself from doing something stupid.

Another step, it looks like he wants to touch it.

On second thought, he *does* have a crowbar under the old D&D table-

"Don't"

He manages to croak instead, twitchy and shaking as Jonathan's hand begins to approach the holiest of places in Mike's existence.

"Don't-touch it...just don't...please"

He forces the last word down, hoping it's enough. His tone is a tad more pathetic than what Mike expected.

Jonathan's hand retreats and Mike shudders with relief.

"Let's go...Nancy's waiting"

Mike says after scrambling for words inside his brain surprisingly fast.

Good job Wheeler.

The aura around Jonathan changes immediately, suddenly remembering his original purpose and his previous embarrassment. He blushes and shudders as that wave of happy thoughts that only someone in love can get so easily.

The way *he* used to blush and shudder.

It fills him with a wave of unjustified anger.

"Ah...yeah, right"

He oh-so smoothly says as Mike goes up the stairs.

"Wait...you're a kid"

Jonathan says, as if he just realized something.

"Great deduction skills Byers"

Mike replies with that cute dosis of Wheeler sarcasm he seems to

have borrowed from his sister.

"So how the hell did you know about...you know"

Oh

Mike stops and looks back at him, his amusement slowly returning, the expression on the older Byers' face is a mix of defiance and embarrassment.

"I'm 14 Jonathan, not 8 and if you really need to know: Magazines, you'd be surprised on how educational they can be...specially those hidden up in your room"

He finishes with a triumphant smirk as he unlocks the basement door and Jonathan's face goes redder than melting steel as a million things cross through his mind.

"How?!"

He asks alarmed.

"Ask Will about it"

And he enters the upper floor, Jonathan follows, thinking about how he's going to *actually* kill his brother.

Mike's eyes travel from Jonathan to the hallway and his smirk dies off in less then a second.

There, standing tall and with a no-negotiating expression is Nancy Wheeler.

Waiting, not for Jonathan, but for him.

Fuck

Jonathan can't say he's actually *not* been in this situation.

Standing awkwardly, playing with his camera in Nancy's room as the siblings talk.

He sees it as a sign that they trust him.

"Michael talk to me"

She's using the Michael, kid's being especially stubborn today.

Said kid demonstrates it by shaking his head softly.

It actually amazes Jonathan, how deeply Nancy affects his brother, the events of last year left deep marks and changes in all of them.

They're sitting on her bed, and she's running her finger over the scar in his hand, he grips the finger softly, to hold the hand and run his own finger over her scar.

He looks back up and there's something he's never noticed before.

Something he can't quite name.

It's the first time they kiss.

But the Wheeler siblings dynamic was perhaps the biggest change, Nancy was basically the only person who could approach Mike and actually make him talk. There was a deep trust and dependence born out of lost friends and shared experiences, concern and deep respect where old bickering used to be.

Mike loved his sister, something he wouldn't say anyone's presence, except for her and, recently he guesses, Jonathan. On the dining table she's the one who shares looks with him, who knows when he needs to talk, to discharge the things he refuses to tell everyone.

She's helped Hopper on his investigation almost as much as Jonathan.

(Did he mention that? Jonathan helping Hopper? Plus points for the guy)

But she's also the one who makes him talk about the things he keeps hidden, even from himself, in her eyes there is the most concern and pity and somehow he hates that about her almost as much as he loves her. He can't bring himself to snap in front of her, to scream, to ignore, to run off, to *hurt* her.

He's at her mercy every time she gets him in here.

And right now he's beginning to crack.

The signs are obvious the sweaty palms, the shaking, the wild eyes looking with grim determination at the floor.

Nancy rubs his shoulder a gesture so lovingly delivered that it almost feels motherly, the concern is palpable and Mike wonders if this is the complete opposite of how people feel around him.

Jonathan thinks this might be the perfect moment to bring the basement up, but Mike looks at him with an infernal intensity. And while he doesn't actually *fear* Michael Wheeler (unlike the entire under-aged population of Hawkins), he doesn't wish for Mike to consider him an enemy and even if he told Nancy after Mike left, she was the kind of person who would *storm* into the basement if deemed necessary.

"What are you so afraid of?"

Mike's trembling now, almost violently, his defenses falling down in a way his mother could never manage.

He's gripping the sheets with white knuckles, and he doesn't realize that he's crying until he notices the first tear fall on the floor.

DammitdammitdammitDAMMIT

Jonathan feels like he shouldn't be here, like he's invading a sacred place, reserved for only the two of them.

"I-I...I promised...I- What if she comes back and she-and she...and she hates me?"

His voice is weak but thick with desperation and begging for reassurance. He's sobbing quietly now and Nancy's embracing him, shushing him and whispering little things.

They embrace in the dark as Jonathan smiles sadly.

A strand of loose hair is softly put aside by Jonathan's loving hand.

She looks so unbelievably beautiful right now.

They fell asleep like that, more like Mike collapsed in his sister's arms and her and Jonathan talked until she too fell asleep.

He sighs.

He's going to have to tell Hopper about this.

But for now.

He gets up, camera in hand and snaps a picture of the sleeping Wheelers, they look really alike, here, in this exact moment, when they're both at peace.

He smiles at the picture before going to Nancy's closet to get a blanket.

Meanwhile, very close yet very far, trapped in the Valley of shadows, a girl watches a boy from the doorway, her lips curl up in a little smile before walking off.

She can't stay.

Not just yet.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Will walk around

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey there!

Long time no see huh? I'm sorry that I didn't update sooner but hey, shit happens.

(This is kinda why I don't like giving people a specific day of release, I'm not very good at keeping up with a schedule)

So why did it take me so much to write this? It isn't even that long dammit, right?

Basically...I got a girlfriend.

And...I was too damn happy for a while to write anything angsty.

Sorry I just couldn't

Welp

With that cat out of the bag, I welcome all feedback and opinions.

Stranger Things doesn't belong to me.

Can't sue me just yet Netflix people.

-The Wandering One

Here.

Right here.

It was here.

Where she saved him.

It's kind of funny, Mike thinks, standing atop this cliff watching the waters below. He jumped that day, certain that he would die and for a second that was true, nothing in this world could defy the all-powerful force of gravity.

But yet again.

She was something else, wasn't she?

Like the pull of an invisible hand, an unknown power of an unseen dimension, her very soul reaching out to save *him*.

He never felt anything quite like what he felt when he saw El standing there, all scraped up and nose bleeding, but *there*, for him.

Mike

Teeth clench, mouth dries, fists clench.

There it is again, that *thing*, tugging and pulling at the back of his brain. He thinks he's starting to feel it more often. He closes his eyes, breathes through his nose, in, out, in, out.

Mike

In, out, in, out.

Mike

(Why doesn't it stop?)

He opens his eyes, takes a deep breath.

Looks down again, to the waters below.

He feels his toes twitch, he's so close to the edge right now.

If he drops.

Will she save him again?

Mike

One step forward, so close.

(C'mon El, c'mon)

Mike!

"Mike"

Will's voice manages to break through the deep fog of his troubled mind. Mike stops, looking up, at the great expanse of the forest they call Mirkwood. His eye twitches, feeling suddenly sick, a burning yet familiar sensation in his gut signaling the growing anger inside of him.

He nods.

Once.

Twice.

And turns around.

"Mike?"

Will's nervous, one of the two constant states he's in since the whole Upside Down...thing.

(The other is *fear*)

"Huh?"

Mike inquires, nonchalant as he walks back to the forest, fall has turned the trees from lush greens to vibrant reds, yellows and oranges. Will tries to no avail to decipher his tone or his face, but he isn't a Dustin, reading people was never his specialty.

"You...you okay?"

He asks carefully, careful has been the default way of dealing with Mike after...after he hit Lucas (somehow Will didn't want to believe that Mike really did it, like it was someone else in Mike's body), well it's been the default way for a long time now. Almost a year, a year that just seems to get worse with each passing days.

"M' fine"

The Wheeler boy replies quietly, almost distant. They walk in leaf-covered trails, silence over them like an invisible veil, even Will can notice that he's definitely not fine, they all can, but he's no Lucas either, defiance or bravery are not defining traits in him.

He doesn't want to get hit.

(But friends don't abandon each other)

He never met Eleven he realizes.

On the first days he heard so much from Dustin and Lucas, and surprisingly, a little bit from Mike.

Yeah, he talked on the first days.

Quiet and sad and somehow hopeful.

But that went away, eventually.

He stopped talking about it, they all did and he became snappy, annoyed every time someone tried to push the issue.

So they gave him space.

Leaving him alone when he told them to, not talking about the lost girl, not touching the Pillow Fort.

Following his lead.

(Like they always did)

But Mike got worse, from talking back, to fighting, to vandalism.

People didn't even know where he went half of the time, the boy was

a shadow, only in town to cause trouble. It made Will...anxious, this...this *wasn't* Mike, Mike was nice and spoke softly, quirky and creative, inventing fantastic tales out of thin air.

Mike hasn't made any campaigns in at least 6 months. He hasn't invited anyone to his house in three weeks and lately, he's been going even less to school.

From what he knows, he hangs around a lot with his brother and Chief Hopper, and occasionally his sister. The reason? No clue, but Lucas and Dustin agree that it *must* be something El-related, according to them, nothing could get Mike as focused on something as the thought of that girl, distracting him from everything else.

Including them.

He talked less, skulked more and every day he seemed more intent on pushing them away from him.

He started walking with him for that reason.

The coughing fits got worse with each passing day (he ignored the slugs, flushed them down as fast as they exited his body down the toilet in hazy fear-induced rampage). Lucas and Dustin asked and asked and asked.

He couldn't answer.

They wouldn't understand.

They never could, no one could understand how it felt to be trapped in there, in that cold, cold place, getting weaker with every breath, hunted down by an otherworldly beast, the feeling of pure *infection* crawling underneath his skin-

No one could understand.

Not them, not his brother, not his mother-

No one.

But Mike didn't ask, he never did.

He asked just once and saw the fear in Will's eyes and since then he never asked again.

(Will thinks he saw something shine in Mike's eyes that day, like a distant memory).

I-I...

S' Ok.

I...

It's ok Will, c'mon, let's fix you up.

Will wonders if Eleven would understand.

He's heard so much about that mysterious special girl, the one Lucas and Dustin speak of in hushed whispers, the name Chief Hopper seems obsessed about when he and Jonathan sit on the living room, short, unintelligible conversations that Will doesn't quite understand.

He's so utterly *fascinated*.

This girl, just the idea of this girl who just changed **everything**.

And there's Mike, who by all accounts should have been the closest to her. Standing and sulking there like a closed fountain of desired information. He wants to ask, to know.

Maybe if he knew more he could help, help Mike, patch things up between Lucas and him.

But he's afraid, the Wheeler boy has changed and the sound of Mike's fist connecting with Lucas' face is burned up inside his brain.

He's afraid.

But Mike is his friend.

He gulps.

"M-Mike...?" he begins, working through his own fears, he *needs* to do this, for his friends.

"Yeah?" he replies, more on reflex than on nothing, his tone betrays nothing, but he's looking up, to the sunlight dancing between the autumn leaves, that means he isn't even listening to him, he's somewhere else.

(But he won't ignore the next thing)

"What....what was she like?"

There it is.

Mike stops.

Will freezes.

WhatDidIDoWhatDidIDoWhatDidIDoWHATDIDIDO

There's this silence.

Will doesn't know exactly how long it is, could be a second, could be a minute, could be an hour.

He's anxious.

What the hell is he thinking?

What WAS she like?

Michael thinks and thinks and THINKS.

And he remembers.

He remembers that scared girl on the Pillow fort, eating those Eggos because they were the damn best thing she ever had in her life, he remembers her voice and eyes and that stupid, stupid feeling in his gut that he felt the second she whispered "pretty", he remembers the fear in her eyes, the memories of demons chasing her, of suffering and loneliness and-

He remembers the way her lips felt on his, that little smile of hers that suddenly made him feel so cocky.

She did so much for him.

She *saved* him.

And he did nothing.

He couldn't save her

He did NOTHING.

"Mike?" Will's quivering voice enters his ears, sobering him up just a little. He *could* say nothing, stay silent, shake him up for good measure. He glances at Will, the Byers' is currently a shivering mess.

He looks up at the trees again, the red leaves falling all around in a scenery of ethereal beauty.

El would have loved it.

He's so damn *tired* of waiting, of looking all around and finding nothing, nine months and ZERO fucking progress.

If only she could give me a sign, a signal, ANYTHING. I KNOW she's alive.

He's getting angry again, hands clenching and unclenching, somehow the anger manages to redirect itself upon the nearest thing.

Exactly.

Will

A million toxic thoughts run through his mind a light speed.

What the hell does *he* know about El?

And then, suddenly, a realization.

Will has been in the Upside Down.

Will takes a step back.

Maybe this all wasn't such a good idea, he frantically realizes as the silence prolongs itself and there's no sign of Mike opening up.

(No, that's it, Dustin was right, he's going to kill me, he's going to drag me to that stupid cliff and throw me like the damn fool I am, why can't you just SHUT YOUR-)

A chuckle break the silence.

Mike is...*laughing*?

What the...?

Mike looks around, amused smile on his face, as if suddenly remembering something.

Will is oh so terribly confused.

"Man" Mike rasps "She was awesome"

Will smiles.

"She made it FLY!?"

Will's excited voice fills the road, sun's going down as they drag their bikes forward towards the Byers residence.

"Yup, just like the real Falcon, made it seem like a piece of cake"

They laugh a bit and Will feels *happy*, just like in the old times, he's laughing and Mike's laughing and their having fun-

They're being friends.

Just a bit more of this and maybe in a few days they can go over to Lucas and they can shake hands.

Progress.

Will's feeling so proud of himself.

So it surprises him when Mike suddenly flips the tables and asks

question of his own.

"You were there" it's a statement, not a question and Will knows exactly what he means with *there*.

The mood is spoiled in seconds and Will nods as he gulps, memories of cold and infection entering his mind like that *thing's*-

"Your mom" he inquires "She talked to you, while you were...you know" his voice is back on that neutral tone, but Will is remembering things he doesn't want to remember and he has no time to notice anything right now.

He nods fast and prays that he's done.

Of course he isn't.

The sun just went down, street lights turned on.

Will looks up at Mike, his gaze is cold but *expecting*.

His voice falters more than once as he explains the strange ritual his mother so desperately concocted to contact with him. Mike listens calmly and nods after he's finished, Will's bad at reading people, he has no clue what Mike's thinking and it scares him.

"So...it worked?" Mike chirps, suddenly cheery again, startling Will.

"What?"

"The whole lights stuff, your mom managed to talk to you with them?" he says as if they were discussing on how to make a sandwich.

Will measures up his words.

"Uh...yeah, I mean... she did something weird, like...wrote an alphabet on a wall" he hopes the dismissive tone is enough to end this conversation.

"Huh" Mike exclaims and Will lets out breath he had no idea he was holding.

Wait.

Why does Mike want to know about this?

"Uh...Mike?"

He begins, every cell of his body telling him that he's going to regret this.

"Hm?"

The smile is still on his face.

"Why... why do you ask?"

Mike looks at him and cheerily answers, something glints behind his eyes and Will feels like it's something dangerous.

"Just curious"

Behind them, a street lamp flickers.

Will coughs over his toilet, he coughs and coughs, disgusted by the feeling of the foreign *things* inside his throat. The world flickers and he feels so **cold**.

He feels something behind him, a feeling, a presence.

He turns around, frantic and panicked, nothing to be seen, but the world flickers again and in the grey reality of the Upside Down there's something unseen.

It's distorted and feels distant, as if it were deeper into the grey Abyss than Will currently is. But the silhouette of a girl is on the other side of his bathroom. He barely recognizes the shape of a torn dress and what looks like a mask.

He doesn't scream just because he's too scared to do anything.

And then just before the world flickers again and the visage gone, a single word resonates through the void.

Mike

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan and Hopper go investigate a lead.

Notes for the Chapter:

So!

Long time no see huh?

I've...got no excuses. Life was hectic and if I'm a 100% honest, I forgot about this. Season 2 refreshed my memories and I checked my email. To my surprise, people were still noticing this story after so long...

Yer so heart-warming guys...

This one...I'm not sure about this one. It was an idea I had since a very long time, but I'm not sure about it. You tell me

This one was actually the last Idea I had before the reunion part.

I hope ya forgive me one day for making you wait this long.

-TheWanderingOne

“What do you mean I can’t come with you?!”

The boy’s voice is both parts demanding and desperate.

This is it! He’s been waiting for a *fucking year*

Mike will **NOT** be denied.

Chief Hopper signs, he knew this was going to be difficult, the words he utters from now on should be carefully selected.

“Mike”

He breathes, taking a pause, if looks could kill he would certainly be dead from the glares the boy is currently shooting at him, Jonathan hovers behind Mike, a looking between Hop and Mike in obvious concern.

“We...can’t be sure if this will lead to something kid, we don’t want to get our hopes up...it could be a trap, dangerous.”

The last word is said with stern finality, something that Hop hopes will make Mike see reason.

But of course nothing is ever that easy with the Wheeler kid.

The boy’s expression seems to recoil in cold fury, filled with indignity and utterly revolted at the thought of *not* risking his life for the lost girl.

“I don’t care”

Three words filled with even more finality, his tone and eyes are matching cold steel, this is perhaps the most important thing of his life right now, he will **NOT** be denied.

Jonathan gulps behind him, holding a fist to his own mouth, kid’s being even more stubborn than usual, he’s starting to regret urging Chief Hopper to tell Mike about their latest findings. But it was their first lead in a year, a year! It was only fair they told Mike, that’s what he told himself anyway. The kid was getting worse by the day, he figured news like these would be the only kind to cheer him up.

But he ain’t *happy*.

He’s cold, seething ire and iron will, if anything Mike looks even more obsessed and desperate, growing more paranoid the closer he is to the object of his mad quest.

Hopper is holding his hands folded over the bridge of his nose,

elbows on his knees as he sits on the couch, the cold steel of headstrong determination is not only present on Michael Wheeler's eyes.

He's not backing down on this one.

He can't.

Not even for Mike.

The kid didn't understand, not even Jonathan or Nancy understood.

Jim was *compromised*.

He was under surveillance, *constant* surveillance and though he couldn't see them, he knew they were out there, watching him, waiting for him to fuck up. Every trip to the city to look for clues, every restricted building he broke in, every time he went out to help Mike he was exposing himself and all of the people he knew.

The government pricks were tricky, in a few days they managed by all intents and purposes to disappear of the face of the earth. The vans were gone, the lab sold and repurposed in a matter of weeks, all documents, information and traces of any projects in Hawkins completely gone.

But Jim used to be a big city detective.

There's always a lead.

It took him a year but finally, *finally* he seemed to have found something, a contact in the form of a deserter of a government program with a heavy conscience.

There were risks, oh so many risks.

He was barely convinced to bring Jonathan along, much less Mike.

He owed Eleven to find her, but also to keep this damn stubborn boy safe for her too.

Said kid wasn't making the job any easier if he may be honest.

Mike was...well he wasn't ok.

He has waited, waited for oh-so-long. He's tired, so fucking tired and this is a lead, a **lead**.

He **NEEDS** this.

WhyCan'tTheySeeThat

He's trying to calm down, clenching his hands and taking deep breaths, but a legion of curses directed at Hopper is being concocted inside his twisted brain and he's having a hard time thinking of him as anything but an obstacle instead of the asset (and friend) he is.

It feels him with as much guilt as unjustified anger.

He can just *feel* Jonathan and his concern behind him, hanging on the living room of the Byers' house like an extremely bad stench. He does not like concern or pity, or vain words, what he likes is Eleven and the possibility of helping her, possibility that's being snuffed out by Chief Jim Hopper and his goddamn insistence and common sense.

HeNeedsThis

Breathe in Wheeler, breathe in.

Hop is just sitting there, cool as a spring breeze.

And it's pissing him off

He hears Jonathan shift behind him, opening and closing his mouth, trying to find the right words for him.

There are no right words.

Don't they understand?

There's a simple solution for this and they're jUsT FUC-

"Mike...this is serious, listen to him" Jonathan croaks, voice steady but tainted with that thin line of concern he's been having since the basement fiasco. (Been 4 months now, Jonathan hasn't said anything

but he can't seem to shake of his own paranoia).

The boy grits his teeth, shaking his head, he *deserves* to be a part of this.

Hopper meets his eyes.

The silent stare-down could have lasted for hours or seconds, but neither party seems ready to back off at any moment.

"Can't risk it kid, you ain't coming"

The older man finally says, Jonathan sucks in a breath and Mike recoils as if he just had been slapped in the face. The boy seems to deflate for a second, utterly confused and defeated, but just for a second. He growls like a beast before running off to the backyard with violence in his eyes.

Jonathan tries to follow but Hopper's hand on his shoulder stops him, the young man looks at the older looking for some sort of guidance, but all he gets is Hop shaking his head and eyes trapped in his own kind of defeat.

They both helplessly sit on the couch as Mike tears the backyard apart with a shovel between loud curses and even louder screams.

The bell rings loudly, announcing all around the School-grounds of Hawkins Middle School that classes are just starting. Students walk around, the sound of shoes against the floor resounding all around, children walking, jogging and running towards the entrance, through the halls towards their classes.

It's another day in Hawkins.

And like any other day, a certain trio walks in a relaxed manner as they chatter amicably amongst themselves. Lucas, Will and Dustin walk into the classroom, relaxed and ready for another school day, talking about anything from how Dustin's mom just makes the *best* Hot Dogs to the usual taunts and brags of who played better the

previous day on Will's console.

The teacher walks in, by all accounts Scott Clarke is considered to be a rather meek fellow. Gentle, scrawny and not particularly impressive on the physical side, nonetheless he had been a constant source of support for the boys since day one in the school. Clarke saw potential in his students and as a teacher it was his duty to help them develop their promising minds, either by providing advice or organizing science fairs for these geeky kids to participate in. When almost everyone seemed to look down upon them, Mr. Clarke seemed to be proud of them.

Which was why the boys didn't hesitate to greet him with beaming smiles, which of course their Teacher responded with one of his own as he made a gentle hand gesture to let them know they should take their seats before raising his voice in the daily attempt to calm the rest of the class down for science class.

Once the air is calm enough he proceeds to check the student list. One name, one hand raised, one either polite or bored exclamation of "Here".

"Michael Wheeler"

Silence.

Will visibly squirms.

He's not here.

Again

He bitterly thinks. Somehow half of the class is staring at the empty seat that was usually occupied by Mike. Enough times and incidents have passed for everyone to know that Mike Wheeler is never up to no good when he's not in class, for most students what follows is a prayer of not having the bad luck of crossing Wheeler's path in whatever chaotic act of violence or vandalism he's about to perform on the town, its people or both.

For Lucas, Dustin and Lucas what follows is the hollow feeling of guilt and the burning fire of concern. Scott gaze lingers on the empty

seat for the moment, he can't help but wonder what the hell happened to that boy. A year ago he wouldn't have thought little Michael to be capable of hurting a fly.

He shakes his head, he's seen what that young man is capable of right inside the school grounds. One of his best students...reduced to what he would call a hopeless punk. His once clean record stained and utterly ruined. He can't do anything but to continue the class and hope the kid is okay, wherever he is.

The country side passes rapidly as Hopper releases another puff of smoke behind the wheel, a grim expression behind his cigarette. Jonathan sits beside him, hands closed around his revolver tight as he sports an equally somber expression. Jim lets himself feel the weight of his own sidearm resting inside of his jacket, they both know this could go bad, very bad.

They had a place. Some run-down bar at the side of the rode, far enough to take them half a day to get there driving. Jonathan can't help but feel nervous, hands clammy and shaking, holding to the weapon for dear life. He doesn't even know why he brought this thing (that's a lie, he knows *exactly* for what he brought it for) with him, he doesn't even know how to shoot it right. His mind immediately wanders to Nancy, a shy smile threatening to show on his face, she knows how to shoot this thing alright...

But he would never ask her to do something like this. He would never put her in danger.

Not her.

And not her brother.

He can still see the attic, the sheer animal panic in the boy's eyes as he approached the tree fort. They're doing this for him as much as they're doing it for *her*.

He remembers her too, Eleven, for the short moments that he saw

her, he remembers the scared little girl clinging to his mother. He can't thank her enough, she helped in bringing his brother back, he'll be forever in her debt, they all will.

They need to do this.

"You think I did the right thing?" Hop's voice cuts through the silence like a knife, the young man looks at the older one. Hopper just looks so...tired, he's already done so much, he's doing so much and he's sure he's going to keep on doing even more. Jim Hopper has been there for everyone, be it the Byers or Mike.

And he doesn't need to ask to what Hopper is talking about

Seeing him causes a rare mix of feelings in Jonathan. There's respect and admiration, it's not hard to admit that even with his busy schedule, this last year he has served as a better father figure for Will, Mike and Jonathan himself than their own fathers. But there's concern too, of course, sometimes Jonathan wonders if the man ever sleeps, there's guilt, with Hopper doing so much he can't but feel like he's not doing enough, even if the thought is illogical in nature.

"Yes, of course" he tells him in the steadiest voice and with the most reassuring smile he can manage. He's having his doubts too, but the last thing Jim needs right now is doubts.

The man's got enough on his shoulders.

The sun shines high in the sky.

They go over some bump in the road, nothing serious, they jump in their seats.

But something jumps behind them too.

There, on the backseat, under the pile of blanket and rags that cover the tools. Except this time there are no tools and Mike Wheeler falls off the seat with a panicked yelp, hand clasped around a crowbar tight as he groans in mild pain and annoyance.

Jonathan and Hopper's eyes look like saucers.

Jim Hopper is *pissed*.

No, in fact he's more than pissed, he's, he's...

Livid, Furious, **Fucking** Fuming.

How the hell couldn't he see this coming?!

Of course (of fucking course) the boy was going to try to sneak in. It's their first lead in a year and the boy has proved again and again that he's tethering over the edge. Of course he didn't receive any phone calls complaining about how Mike was vandalizing the town in fiery anger, he wasn't even *in* the town.

It all seemed so ridiculously obvious in that moment, with Mike Wheeler sitting on the truck's backseat practically vibrating at hypersonic speed with anticipation.

Jim's scowl deepens.

Of course he resisted at first. They stopped the truck and proceeded to basically yell at the boy in their panicked state (in their defense, Mike almost gave them a heart attack) and Mike, of course, yelled right back. With their throats sore, what followed was a rather intense staring duel between Hopper and Wheeler that ended in Hop's violent outrage towards his vehicle in the form of several kicks to one of the wheels as he let forth a string of profanities.

A display, some might say, that rivaled even some of Mike's own tantrums.

And they ended all like this, sitting back inside the truck with Jonathan this time behind the wheel. They couldn't turn back now or they would lose their chance, Mike was part of this now, for better or worse.

Definitely worse if they asked Hopper.

He was a failure, couldn't even keep the kid out and if something happened to him, he just *knows* he'll never be able to forgive himself.

The ride, despite all is silent. The aura surrounding the three males

becoming more somber and tense the closer they get to their target. The sky is painted in a sort of orange hue when they get there, the establishment looking as run down as they thought it would seem.

They're there.

Easing the vehicle to a stop, Jonathan watches as Jim shoots a threatening glare towards Mike who immediately huffs annoyed and stops in his hurried attempt to get out of the car. The boy is high-strung, visibly tense and the elder Byers thinks he may have seen one of his eyes twitch.

He's the most desperate to get answers.

Which is why they have to be extra careful.

Hopper beckons him to come closer, it's time to listen.

"Alright, we're here. We go in, we listen to what he has to say, we take whatever he can give us and we go, simple as that. I will do the talking, I repeat, especially to you Mike "That last particular barb earning an annoyed growl from the minor "I will do the talking".

"Understood?"

Jonathan's nod is determined, firm.

Mike's nod is feverish and eager.

Both men check their pistols, Mike hides the crowbar he's been clutching the whole way inside his jacket.

They step out of the truck.

The bar is as run-down as one would expect from a tiny locale sitting on the edge of the road. Dark, humid and rife with a rancid smell that made Mike wince. Wooden floors that seem more rotten than anything, with equally pathetic chairs, tables and stools, all illuminated with the eerie, yellow glow of cheap light bulbs. It was positively deserted, chairs and tables empty all around, hell, even the barkeeper is absent.

Mike thinks nothing of it, he's too anxious to care, they're there pretty early anyway, the truck-drivers eager to drown themselves in beer are probably on the road or something.

Either way he doesn't care.

What he *does* care about is sitting on the bar, looking quiet anxious. A skinny fellow, long messy hair, big glasses, a shirt with a floral pattern that seems to belong more to a beach than anything else. Hopper would say that the guy looked like a hippie, Mike didn't remember what a hippie was and frankly did not care, his eyes were glued to the manila file the man was holding as if his life depended on it.

It actually did depend on it.

Because Mike was going to beat him bloody if he didn't give it to him.

His madness must have been apparent because he suddenly felt

Jonathan's hand squeezing his shoulder and if looks could kill, Hopper's glare would have done more damage than a machinegun. He tried to suppress a grumble, he was so close now, he could wait just a few minutes.

The man jumped, yelped and squealed like a little girl as Jonathan and Hopper sat themselves on either side of him, Mike sitting beside the older Byers, eyeing the man's every move and gesture, his eyes drawn like moths to a flame to the folder on his hands.

There. So close. Progress

Progress, progress, sweet, sweet progress. His mind chanted in glorious chorus, finally, *finally* something. He had begged, hoped and screamed for this, he had coursed and fought for this, a sign, a clue, *anything* for almost a year now. And now it was right before his eyes, not an empty hope or a distant promise, but tangible, **real**.

So close El, wherever you are I'm gonna save you. I'm gonna save you and hold you and nothing is never-ever going to hurt you again-

"About time"

The man's voice cuts through his feverish line of thinking. Tone laced with annoyance after his eyes stop widening in panic and terror to widen them again in recognition when he gets a good look of Chief Hopper.

The Chief is way better than this than either him or Mike. Casual stance, eyes held forward, Jonathan's mirroring him, but is clearly

stealing glances at the situation, Mike doesn't bother with subtlety, leaning sideways to get a good look.

Despite the high-and-mighty attitude, the hippie-wannabe is almost shivering, eyes still darting from side to side as if he expected men in black to storm through the windows any second now. The man was afraid, Mike was too desperate to be afraid.

"Were you followed?" the man asks, letting his weak mask collapse completely for just a moment.

"No" Jim deadpans, resolute "You?"

"N-no" the hippie-wannabe stutters, cool as a Sahara afternoon. "I'm sure" he finishes, a bit more decisive than before, not that much.

"You've got what we agreed on?" Drones Hopper without looking at him, dammit Hop, Mike thinks sardonically, you an ex-spy or something? You're making me look bad. Another voice in the back of his head tells him he doesn't need Hopper for that, he ignores it.

Their contact nods feverishly as he passes the folder to the Chief, Mike has to stop himself from jump forward and grab it.

"It's all there" the hippie-wannabe reassures them "All of them, the facilities, the staff..."

Jim nods and the man falls silent, Mike is sweating now.

Mike

Dammit not now.

Jim is taking the folder and nodding, depositing the precious object inside his jacket as he sets a hand on the table to get up.

Mike

I said not. NOW

His hands were shivering, Mike felt giddy, was it really so easy. Jonathan seemed to match his mood, flashing him a grin as he prepared to get up too. They did it, progress!

Mike!

Then all hell broke loose of course. There was a flash of movement, something whizzed through the air, hit the hipster-wannabe in the throat, went right through it. The sound of glass shattering followed, a bottle across the bar, spraying glass-shards and stinking booze, then the window, large pieces falling and shattering into tiny shiny fragments as the dirty glass disappeared to offer a view of the road.

Then, a roar, a boom.

Mike realized that the sound had been a shotgun when he noticed that the drops that had fallen on his face weren't alcohol, but blood, spurting warm and unrestrained from the neck wound before the man collapsed, eyes wide in surprise and *death*, body falling out of the chair like a rag-doll and colliding with the ground with a thud. The man twitched, once, twice, opened his mouth to say something but only blood gushed out as the crimson liquid kept spilling out of his neck.

Mike watched, transfixed, frozen.

(It sorta reminded him of the clouded gazes of the Bad Men that night in the school. The sounds of bone snapping under psionic will, death manifested with a simple head movement)

His ears were ringing and he somehow hadn't noticed that Hopper and Jonathan had vaulted over the counter and had gotten their handguns out.

Mike!

Were they calling him? Bullets whizzed past him, he knew what they were now; Jonathan's face was twisted as he desperately tried to reach Mike with his voice over the thundering roar of guns. Curious, he couldn't see anything across the street, he couldn't see the bullets either, just the ringing of his own ears as they banged and banged and banged and the bottles erupted in tiny shards and showers of liquid.

Mike!!

What was that voice? It called and called and called but it wasn't there. Why couldn't he move?

He was going to die here wasn't he?

I'm sorry El, I-

MIKE

The scream became a screech, a terrible presence inside his skull that numbed everything else, forcing him to shut his eyes as he suddenly found himself gliding across the air, no longer a slave to mere laws of physics. And then Mike crashed, back protesting through his nervous system in the familiar sensation of pain as his body collided with one of the tables, falling conveniently under it, away from the line of fire.

What the FUCK was that?!

The sound of glass shattering rang true once again as man seemed to be thrown like a ragdoll away from the tree-line across the road and through the window of the run-down, shot-up bar. The corpse was dressed in black fatigues and his hand was still holding a submachine-gun tightly, his neck had been twisted, bent in an unnatural angle with such ferocity that it seemed like the deed had been done by a savage beast rather than any known human force.

Mike didn't see any of that, he was too busy being frozen in panic and being dragged away by Hopper, who yelled and aimed and shot and gestured Jonathan to help him with Mike. The gun-fire

intensified, burst more frantic and violent. But the fire was no longer focused on them, the sound of wood being splintered by bullet impacts resounded through the air as gunshots echoed through the wood.

The young Wheeler thought he heard screams, the sound of bodies being thrown against trees, the sickening sound of bones snapping under psionic will.

How Jonathan and Hopper dragged him hurriedly through the back door and threw him into their car didn't really register by him. Everything was a haze, everything seemed like a dream, he had almost died and he was still processing that when he fell asleep in the back-seat.

But Jim and Jonathan shared a worried look, when all was said and done and they were completely sure that no one was shooting at them anymore. Their eyes crossed and worry was etched upon them, for they were the ones that witnessed the man being thrown through the window, possessed by an otherworldly power.

A power they knew only one could wield.

Jim squeezed the Manila folder inside his jacket.

Meanwhile, very close yet very far, trapped in the Valley of Shadows, a girl stands unseen amongst corpses lingering in another world.

Hands shaky, breath frantic behind the gas-mask, the girl reminds herself why she did what she did, reminds herself that they were bad men trying to hurt the ones precious to her.

She reminds herself that she's doing it for him and that she would do more for him.

She whispers his name across the aether.

One day he'll hear it.